

Idaho Online Class Requirement For High School Graduation Gets Board Approval

BOISE, Idaho — Education officials on Thursday gave final approval to a plan that makes Idaho the first state in the nation to require high school students to take at least two credits online to graduate, despite heavy criticism of the plan at public hearings this summer.

The measure is part of a sweeping education overhaul that introduces teacher merit pay and phases in laptops for every high school teacher and student.

Proponents say the virtual classes will help the state save money and better prepare students for college. But opponents claim they'll replace teachers with computers

and shift state taxpayer money to the out-of-state companies that will be tapped to provide the online curriculum and laptops.

The rule will apply to students entering the 9th grade in fall 2012. It goes before Idaho lawmakers for review in the 2012 session, which starts in January.

The education board gave the online graduation requirement its initial approval in September after heavy opposition was voiced this summer at public hearings across

Idaho. Trustees collected more feedback during a 21-day public comment period last month.

"A majority of the comments felt there should not be an online learning requirement," said board member Don Soltman during the meeting.

Schools nationwide offer virtual classes, but just three states – Alabama, Florida and Michigan – have adopted rules since 2006 to require online learning, according to

the International Association of K-12 Online Learning. The online rules vary from state to state, but Idaho would be the first to require two credits online.

The Idaho Education Association blasted the decision in a statement Thursday, saying the board "overruled the wishes of a majority of Idahoans and disregarded parental choice" by mandating the online credits.

To online learning advocates, the requirement seems reasonable. They say children need to be prepared for the world that awaits them after high school.

"There is still a live teacher. It may be at a distance, but that teacher is still instructing and interacting with the student," said Susan Patrick, president of the International Association for K-12 Online Learning, a Washington-based nonprofit.

Kendra Wisenbaker, 28, is among those questioning the Idaho plan.

"The poor kids are guinea pigs," said Wisenbaker, an elementary school teacher in Meridian, the state's largest school district.

Like many of her students, Wisenbaker is on Facebook, and she spends several hours a day online. But when it comes to requiring her tech-savvy kids to learn in a

virtual classroom once they enter high school, Wisenbaker is among Idaho teachers who aren't so sure.

"I am a little conflicted, I am. It won't work for every kid, and I think requiring it is a horrible idea," said Wisenbaker, who also reasons that some students may thrive

learning online. "But it shouldn't be an option for saving money," she said during an interview with The Associated Press.

In Idaho, members of the state Board of Education have said most of the opposition is directed at new education laws as a whole – not just the online requirements.

Nationwide, state legislatures tackled education policy this year and triggered protests from teachers over proposed changes to their collective bargaining rights, and

how they are evaluated and paid. But Idaho has made some of the most sweeping changes, according to education experts.

The state is introducing teacher merit pay, limiting union bargaining rights and shifting money from salaries toward changes such as more classroom technology, as

part of the changes backed by public schools chief Tom Luna and the governor.

The overhaul has drawn heavy criticism, including from educators. But to others, Luna is changing a system that was badly broken and they have commended him for

restructuring how Idaho's scarce education dollars are spent.

A group seeking to recall Luna over the education changes failed to collect enough voter signatures earlier this year, but parents and teachers who want to overturn the

new laws did meet a June deadline to put three repeal measures on the November 2012 ballot.